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Political Communications in the "Fake News" Era: Six Lessons for Europe

By Heidi Tworek

In Brief: How far did the media determine the results of Britain's vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election? To answer the questions of whether, how, and why communications matter, this paper draws together a wide spectrum of research from history, psychology, and recent political events in Europe and the United States. The paper suggests six major recommendations for European politicians as they approach communications in the uncertain world of 2017. Many of these recommendations are most pertinent for elections, but they provide broader perspectives on how communications affect voters' behavior and perceptions. The best communications cannot substitute for good governance, but good governance can only succeed with innovative communications techniques to back it up. At a time of disorienting swift change, the most successful politicians will combine older techniques to reach more conventional voters with newer, more granular outreach.

One of the major arguments still raging around Britain's vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election is the role played by the media and political communications. The Pope even weighed in, warning the media against an obsession with scandal and "fake news," because journalists risked falling into "the sickness of coprophilia," an abnormal and possibly eroticized interest in feces.[1]

The questions seem endless and hard to quantify. Would better communications by the Hillary Clinton campaign have made a difference? What about filter bubbles online that only feed users what they want to read? How can we know that one news article or even news coverage in general really changed a voter's opinion? Are there any lessons for Europe from the U.S. elections or are the systems simply too different?

The best communications cannot substitute for good governance, but good governance can only succeed with innovative communications techniques to back it up. At a time of disorienting swift change, the most successful politicians will combine older techniques to reach more conventional voters with newer, more granular outreach.

Europeans have a long tradition of seeing their media and political environments as rather distinct from the United States. One definition classifies the American culture of political communications as "media-oriented,"

1 Holy See, "Interview with the Holy Father Francis for the Belgian Catholic Weekly 'Tertio,'" December 7, 2016, http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/12/07/161207a.html.

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while Germany has a (party-)political system.[2] Political communications of course depends upon both politics and communications. Germany's strong public broadcasting system contrasts with the U.S. commercial system; there are different cultural norms of communications and different legal frameworks around free speech.

> *"Strategies from the past can be successfully revived in a slightly altered form."*

Each political system yields different forms of political communications, because political communications build on the logic of the system. It is no surprise, then, that U.S. political communications culture operates differently than in Germany. American politicians are directly elected and focus on using media to garner support from their voters (and their financial backers). German politicians, meanwhile, focus on their party: the voting system of two ballots with one ballot cast for a party has fostered a far stronger role for parties in the German political system.

While U.S. politics and media follow a different logic, it would be unwise to assume that this obviates any need to learn lessons from across the Atlantic. Since the 1990s, German political culture has moved closer to the U.S. model with the rise of political talk shows like Sabine Christiansen's creating what one critic has called "an amalgamation of publicity, politics, and entertainment."[3]

There are also broader forces sweeping the two continents. Political establishments face the rise of populism. The media face fundamental challenges to their business models from the rise of free online news. Governments face massive discontent about economic policies and a wave of anxiety about the future. They are threatened by hacking and foreign interference in news supply. Some of these problems are new; some are rather old. Social media have not fundamentally changed human nature. Many communications strategies from the past could be successfully revived in a slightly altered form. To answer the questions of whether, how, and why communications matter, this paper draws together a wide spectrum of research from history, psychology, and recent political events in Europe, the United States, and Canada.

Media and the press offer some of the main means of communication within political campaigning and society as a whole. More recently, media have come to include social media like Twitter or Facebook, though "the media" generally refers to channels like TV, radio, or newspapers. Communication is a far broader phenomenon, encompassing face-to-face interactions and any methods of human beings exchanging or imparting information, including popular culture and symbolism.

This paper suggests six major recommendations for European politicians as they approach communications in the uncertain world of 2017. Many of these recommendations are most pertinent for elections, but they provide broader perspectives on how communications affect voters' behavior and perceptions.

1. Have an Event-Led Communications Strategy

On January 2, 1980, a national steel strike began unexpectedly in the United Kingdom. No one in 10 Downing Street was prepared. The relatively new and tiny No. 10 Policy Unit quickly crafted a response. Composed of two businessmen, Norman Strauss and John Hoskyns, as well as one civil servant, the Unit had been charged with thinking about how to rein in trade unions, keep down inflation, and reform the British economy.

2 B. Pfetsch, "Political Communication Culture in the United States and Germany," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 6, no. 1 (2001): 46-67. There is also a tradition in communications studies of classifying and comparing different media systems. While theoretically helpful, it can also undermine attempts to learn lessons from experiences in other countries or to look more for underlying similarities.

3 L. Hachmeister, *Nervöse Zone: Politik und Journalismus in der Berliner Republik* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2007), p. 23.

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After thinking deeply about how to respond to the strike, Strauss reached an unexpected strategic decision. His *covert* recommendation was to extend the strike for as long as possible, rather than seeking to end it quickly. Prolonging the strike would mean that the media had to find new ways of covering the story every day. Journalists could not simply report the same thing day after day, thought Strauss. They would have to find new angles to explore. As Strauss put it, "the story would move from news to features; and from features to real families, villages, cities, and regions." Over time, this would create greater public awareness about how unions worked and how the Thatcher government aimed to reform unions.

The strike lasted three months, ending in early April. Strauss would call this approach "event-led communications." This approach took advantage of events to educate the public about the major issues that the Thatcher government aimed to address. Even some ministers in the government did not really understand (or know) the point of this necessarily covert strategy. Stopping the strike was not the point; although it would have been tactically cheap, Strauss saw it as strategically costly. No lessons would have been learned, no new data communicated, no doubts raised, no minds changed nor behaviors altered. Rather, the Thatcher government did not object to a prolonged strike, as it was a way to inform the British public about the wider aims to change labor-management relations and reform the British economy.[4]

Event-led communications can be planned, as in the case of the strike. Or it can be unplanned, as with Donald Trump. Trump often prolonged battles on Twitter, for example in July 2016 with the Khizr and Ghazala Khan, parents of a decorated Muslim-American soldier killed in Iraq in 2004, who had spoken out against Trump at the Democratic National Convention (DNC). Commentators could not comprehend why Trump would double down on insulting a family dedicated to the United States and its military. But this feud kept Trump at the top of the news for a week following what had been a successful DNC. By seizing upon this event, Trump kept himself in the public eye, and kept Clinton out.

4 This rendition of events is based on an e-mail exchange with Norman Strauss between November 2016 and January 2017.

Brexit too bears out Strauss' arguments. A member of then Prime Minister David Cameron's team during the EU negotiations and the Brexit campaign, Daniel Korski, concluded afterwards that communications had made little difference to the end result of the Brexit vote.[5] One commentator, Janan Ganesh, has argued that 2004 was more important than 2016, because the real reason for the Brexit victory was Tony Blair's decision in 2004 to allow free immigration from new EU member states.[6] Public relations strategists might claim that they can move the needle of public opinion. More frequently, events will do the trick nicely.[7] Communications can sow seeds, but they need fertile ground.

> *"Follow an events-led strategy built on purposes and related values."*

Events, of course, are unavoidable. They happen. They can derail even the best-planned communications strategy if you do not seize upon them pragmatically. It is a skill to choose the right events to amplify. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder masterfully used the Elbe flood of 2002 to create an image as a competent crisis manager and to gain re-election. Matteo Renzi, by contrast, did not find an event to capitalize on before the Italian referendum in December 2016.

Recommendation: Your communications strategy is like a chameleon. The body and internal organs are values. The skin is the superficial layer that changes pigmentation rapidly according to surrounding events. As the chameleon's body stays the same, regardless of its skin color, so too should your campaign's values. Follow

5 D. Korski, "Why We Lost the Brexit Vote: Behind the Scenes of the Flawed Campaign to Keep the UK in the EU," *Politico Europe*, October 24, 2016, http://www.politico.eu/article/why-we-lost-the-brexit-vote-former-uk-prime-minister-david-cameron/.

6 Citizens of the EU have a right to move and reside freely within the member states; however, this may be restricted by individual member states for a transitional period of up to seven years after a new country joins the EU. In 2004, when 10 primarily Central and Eastern European countries joined in the "big bang" enlargement, only the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Sweden opened their borders immediately.

7 J. Ganesh, "Only Events Can Shift the Brexit Debate," *Financial Times*, November 28, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/dbe16d3c-b550-11e6-961e-a1acd97f622d.

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an events-led communication strategy built on purposes and related values. Think about which events can work in your favor because they bolster your values and give your campaign the agenda-setting function in public discourse. When the events that you push make it from the news pages into the feature pages, you will know that your strategy is working.

2. Base Your Event-Led Communications Strategy on Thoughtfully-Articulated Values

Why are values the foundation of a communications strategy? Values enable voters to connect emotionally and ideologically with a policy platform. Psychologists and cognitive scientists have long argued that humans are not wholly rational. Approximately 98 percent of our thought is unconscious; our rationalizations for our choices seem coherent, though they are often influenced by forces that we do not perceive consciously. In one psychology experiment, for example, subjects were shown different pairs of words, including "ocean-moon." The participants were then asked to select a laundry detergent from various options. Those who had seen the words "ocean-moon" were twice as likely to choose the popular detergent in the United States called Tide. When asked why, participants gave rational justifications like "Tide is the best-known detergent" or "I like the Tide box." These perfectly reasonable answers could not account for the subconscious priming that seeing the words "ocean-moon" had achieved.[8] Even when we appear to provide rational answers to justify our choices, they are based on what neurologists term "confabulation." That essentially means made-up rationalizations based on apparent reason, while the decisions were actually made based on emotion or intuition.

It is hard to accept that human beings do not operate rationally and that we produce seemingly rational explanations for choices that were unconsciously primed. But we must accept it if we are to understand how to conduct political communications effectively.

> *"Any mention of an opponent's frame switches the brain onto that frame."*

As prominent cognitive scientist George Lakoff put it, "most real political discourse makes use of unconscious thought, which shapes conscious thought via unconscious framing and commonplace conceptual metaphors."[9] Trump communicated successfully to millions of voters because he and his campaign framed the world in terms of powerful metaphors. Voters use metaphors to think about the nation as a family. Conservative voters tend to think about the nation along a "Strict Father" model, where responsibility is personal and the strong deserve to win against the weak. Progressives tend to conceive of the nation along the "Nurturant Parent" model where responsibility is social.

Many voters are moderates who partially believe in each of these models, depending upon the issue. Our brains, however, can only have one model "switched on" at any one time. Trump used metaphors very effectively, argues Lakoff, to activate the "Strict Father" frame. For example, Trump talked frequently about how strong military fathers produced strong military sons and portrayed defending the United States as a family affair. Trump's love of his family and concern for their success could be anchored in voters' minds as a metonym for Trump's concern for the family of the nation's citizens. Trump's repeated use of the word "win" anchored the idea of winning in listeners' neural circuits and bolstered a particular worldview amongst committed conservatives and a significant portion of undecided voters. "Love trumps hate" might have seemed a smart slogan for the Democrats. It was not. The Clinton campaign's constant attempts to rebut Trump by quoting him or fact-checking him had the opposite of the desired effect: any mention of an opponent's frame switches the brain onto that frame.

8 Experiment by Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson (1977), described in J. Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 299.

9 G. Lakoff, "Understanding Trump," July 23, 2016, https://georgelakoff.com/2016/07/23/understanding-trump-2/. For a more in-depth articulation of Lakoff's work, see G. Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014).

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Lakoff's frames provide another explanation for many German voters' displeasure with Chancellor Angela Merkel's refugee policy. Merkel had long embodied the "Strict Parent" frame, with politicians even explicitly referring to her as "Mutti." The refugee policy, however, offered more of a "Nurturant Parent" model, where German society would help to take responsibility for a global problem. Merkel's much-derided phrase "wir schaffen das" ("we'll manage it") from August 2015 symbolized a model of social responsibility that was a step too far for a certain portion of her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) voters (and those of the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union). Merkel's switch of models, and thus seemingly of values, provides another perspective on why trust in her leadership declined.

> *"Recognize that human beings are emotional voters."*

Politicians should start with positively-framed discussions of values rather than facts or numbers. Policies are vital, but they should back up values. Politicians should also understand the importance of metaphorical language to frame politics and remain aware of how they can avoid activating frames from their opponents about how the nation should function. Emotional savviness is not the same as demagoguery. Justin Trudeau managed to come from third place in the polls several months before the Canadian elections in 2015 to win a stunning victory because he effectively used emotions to create trust.

Many European politicians have already learned these lessons. During Austria's presidential elections in December 2016, Alexander Van der Bellen's clear articulation of European values and refusal to rise to his far-right opponent Norbert Hofer's provocations during the debates earned him victory, even if it was uncomfortably close. (Van der Bellen only received 350,000 more votes than Hofer.)

Recommendation: Recognize that human beings are emotional voters. Do not just recognize it. Internalize it. Plan your political campaign, themes, and language accordingly. This does not mean that facts do not matter because they matter a great deal. But a campaign based solely on facts will have to battle far harder to beat a campaign based on what feels true.

3. Make a Granular Media Campaign

The media landscape is changing dramatically: fewer citizens purchase newspapers; more news spreads through social media; more communication on the Internet is visual; trust in media institutions is declining throughout Europe. Mathias Döpfner, chief executive of the Axel Springer publishing group, warned in September 2016 that media companies needed new business models to survive. Otherwise, Döpfner prophesied "a total mix-up of rumors and facts — a pretty traumatic scenario of information or propaganda. It will be very painful for democracies."[10] The problems are real, and they cannot be solved in the next few months before upcoming elections in Europe. However, as they seek long-term solutions to these challenges, politicians can adapt by creating more granular communications that target particular groups in different ways.

Using granular targeting on social media is also known as microtargeting and played a significant role in Trump's electoral campaign. After Trump's victory, the data analysis company Cambridge Analytica celebrated its role in Trump's success. The company is a subsidiary of the SCL Group, which has worked for over 20 years in political communications. One of Trump's biggest donors, the father-daughter team of Robert and Rebekah Mercer, is a major investor in Cambridge Analytica. Trump's lead strategist Steve Bannon sits on the company's board. Cambridge Analytica analyzed Facebook along with other publicly available data for around 230 million Americans and combined this with individualized psychological

10 D. Bond and G. Chazan, "Axel Springer Chief Warns Traditional Media Risk Extinction," *Financial Times*, September 27, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/6d6b6ac8-83ce-11e6-a29c-6e7d9515ad15.

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profiling.[11] The company used this data to decide upon Trump's rally locations. Once rallies were arranged, the company used geo-fencing to advertise the rallies and to target individuals with the types of ads that would either encourage them to vote for Trump or perhaps discourage them from voting altogether. Trump won the election by just under 80,000 votes combined in the three decisive states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. It is important not to overestimate the role of one company: Ted Cruz also hired Cambridge Analytica for his unsuccessful primary campaign. Still, with such a small margin of victory, Cambridge Analytica's individualized intervention may have made the difference (among many possible factors). It also contrasted with the Clinton campaign's greater reliance on demographic targeting and polling data rather than individualized microtargeting. European political parties may use similar services or techniques to reach voters below the usual radar.

Mainstream European political parties have made very little use of social media. The Front National's Marine Le Pen has 1.2 million followers on Twitter, more than mainstream French presidential candidates François Fillon and Emmanuel Macron combined (both have around 400,000). The Alternative for Germany (AfD) page has more Facebook likes than those of the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) combined.

The reluctance to use social media is understandable. Selfies can backfire, as Merkel and a young Syrian refugee discovered when a Facebook page claimed he was one of the terrorists behind the March 2016 Brussels attacks.[12] The trick lies in finding enthusiastic young people to run your social media. If they can get ten thousands followers on Instagram for a puppy, they have some skills that you do not possess. There is still tremendous potential for increasing engagement. 28 million Germans have a Facebook account. The AfD page only has just over 300,000 likes. American politicians use Facebook to generate support for themselves and to drum up votes, German politicians might focus on using Facebook to support their party's platform. This would correspond to the different political communications culture in Germany, which needs to drum up voters for a party more than for a particular politician.

> *"Find enthusiastic young people to run your social media, listen to them and act accordingly."*

Social media strategies of course need to go beyond likes and retweets. Use those same enthusiastic young people to communicate with other young people about the importance of voting. Communicate that real-world actions like voting have greater consequences than social media posts. Running more effective communications does not mean appropriating the populists' tools and disregard for truth. It requires long, hard thought about what matters to voters and how to speak to and with them, rather than at them.

Recommendation: Create a granular media campaign, including social media. Beware of relying too much on demographics. Demographic assumptions were always generalizations. Not all women vote one way, nor do Catholics, nor second-generation Turkish immigrants. Individuals matter and do not always vote as their gender or socio-economic status "shows" they will. Find enthusiastic young people to run your social media, be humble, listen to them and act fast accordingly.

4. Ignore Disruptors and "Fake News"

On initial inspection, the spread of "fake news" is startling. During the last months of the U.S. election, the top 20 best-performing fake and unreliable hyperpartisan election news articles spawned more engagement on Facebook (shares, reactions, and comments) than the

11 H. Grassegger and M. Krogerus, "Ich habe nur gezeigt, dass es die Bombe gibt," *Das Magazin*, December 3, 2016, https://www.dasmagazin.ch/2016/12/03/ich-habe-nur-gezeigt-dass-es-die-bombe-gibt/. For a more skeptical interpretation of Cambridge Analytica's influence, see E. Oberndorfer, "Ist Facebook-Targeting wirklich schuld am Sieg von Donald Trump?" *Wired*, December 5, 2016, https://www.wired.de/collection/business/ist-micro-targeting-facebook-wirklich-schuld-trumps-sieg.

12 F. Reinbold, "Selfie with Merkel Haunts Refugee," *Spiegel Online*, January 19, 2017, http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/selfie-with-merkel-haunts-young-syrian-refugee-a-1130768.html.

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top 20 from major news websites.[13] This was not the case before August 2016, the month that Facebook removed its human editors from its Trending news topics feature. CEO Mark Zuckerberg initially denied that fake news was a problem after the election, though Facebook is now cooperating with other platforms like Google to remove advertising from the worst offenders and has launched initiatives to combat fake news in Germany.

> *"It is critical to combat fake news without amplifying or constantly addressing it."*

Still, fake news and conspiracy theories long predate August 2016. Even at the start of the American republic, Thomas Jefferson decried the widespread "falsehoods and errors" appearing in newspapers.[14] American populist William Jennings Bryan started his own newspaper after losing the presidential election of 1896; his newspaper railed against "an epidemic of false news" in 1907.[15] The League of Nations canvassed its members and journalists' associations about how to combat "false news" in the early 1930s.[16] Fake news may spread faster today, but it has always accompanied the real.

Alongside regulatory solutions, it is critical to combat fake news without amplifying or constantly addressing it. Repeating fake news stories, even to rebut them, means that people are more likely to believe the story. They will later remember the story without remembering that it was denied or described as false.[17] One recent study has suggested that it might work to provide proactive warnings against false information: articles on climate change that included a detailed debunking of a myth prevented many readers from believing false articles that they encountered later. The researchers call this "an attitudinal theory of inoculation." A vaccine includes a small amount of a virus to provoke people to develop an immunity to the virus in the real world. Similarly, including a small piece of false information with a thorough debunking inoculated readers from a later epidemic of fake narratives.[18] Still, this is only one study and we do not yet have enough information to necessarily construct a full communications campaign around this strategy. You will have to decide which stories to rebut and which to counter with your own narrative. If you expend all your energy denying fake news or fact-checking, you will lose control of your own agenda.

Recommendation: Ignore the disruptors and their vocabulary. Do not make your message anti-someone else. That only cements the person or party you oppose in your audience's mind. If you continually denounce an extremist party or react to their politicians' outrageous statements, you will make the party better known. You will draw attention to the party's positions and bolster its image. Your message must be front and center.

5. Confront International Influences on National News Spaces

Recognize the power of international influences on your news. This runs in two directions: information provision and information stealing. International news provision is not in and of itself nefarious. It may not even happen for political reasons. Many of the Macedonian teenagers who made up stories during the U.S. election did so to earn

13 The fake stories received over 8.7 million engagements, while the stories from major news websites garnered just under 7.4 million. C. Silverman, "This Analysis Shows How Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook," *BuzzFeed*, November 16, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.wjz4JgY2b#.doyBgMvLm.

14 For a multitude of historical examples, see J. Shafer, "Don't Fret about Fake Political News," *Politico*, November 16, 2016, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/fake-news-media-facebook-214459.

15 A. LaFrance, "How the Fake News Crisis of 1896 Explains Trump," *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/the-fake-news-crisis-120-years-ago/513710/?utm_source=eb.

16 H. Tworek, "Peace through Truth? The Press and Moral Disarmament through the League of Nations," *Medien & Zeit* 25.4 (2010), pp. 24–28, https://www.academia.edu/492750/Peace_through_Truth_The_Press_and_Moral_Disarmament_through_the_League_of_Nations

17 L. Fazio, "Unbelievable news? Read it again and you might think it's true," *The Conversation*, December 5, 2016, https://theconversation.com/unbelievable-news-read-it-again-and-you-might-think-its-true-69602.

18 N. Lomas, "Fake News' Power to Influence Shrinks with a Contextual Warning, Study Finds," *Techcrunch*, January 23, 2017, https://techcrunch.com/2017/01/23/fake-news-power-to-influence-shrinks-with-a-contextual-warning-study-finds/.

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money from advertising.[19] Information provision from foreign nations has a long history, reaching back centuries. The BBC during World War II or Radio Free Europe in the Cold War traversed borders into "enemy territory" and supplied millions with news. Today, Russia's RT reaches around 36 million Europeans every week.[20] The Russian approach builds on a "Firehose of Falsehood" model.[21] This model floods the market with constant and repetitive messages across multiple channels. The news site Breitbart is expanding to France and Germany; it may choose a similar approach. It remains a vital lesson that news space can very easily become an international battleground.

> *"There is barely any cost to hacking, yet its effects can be devastating."*

Information stealing has an equally long history. What we now call hacking we used to call espionage. Hacking is a far cheaper form of espionage that builds on older wiretapping techniques. Recognize the very real threat of hacks. Senior figures in the German government dismissed hacking as recently as October 2016 because they thought that German politics was too inconsequential for countries like Russia to bother. This was an odd attitude even then. The Bundestag was severely hacked in 2015. Now, Europeans seem to be taking hacking more seriously. The head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, Hans-Georg Maaßen, warned in November 2016 about "a hybrid threat that seeks to influence public opinion and decision-making processes."[22] There is barely any cost to hacking, yet its effects can be devastating.

Recommendation: Take international influence on communications seriously but also do not fall into the trap of thinking it is wholly unprecedented and requires an exaggerated, panicked response. Go back to basics. Ensure that your communications are properly encrypted with two-factor authentication. Use more face-to-face meetings or the telephone for sensitive discussions if possible. Hacking will fall rather flat if the only juicy bits from your e-mails are smoothie recipes.

6. Do Not Overestimate the Power of the Media

Despite all the noise of communications and new techniques and fretting about the end of facts, it is unclear how much any reporting matters. Even if people believed fake news, we do not know if that changed their vote in the ballot box. The lived experience of government may be far more important than any fake or exaggerated story.

One historian, Allan Lichtman, has long expressed skepticism about our understanding of U.S. elections. In the early 1980s, Lichtman developed a system of 13 true/false statements that he has termed the "Keys to the White House." This system views elections more as a referendum on the party currently sitting in the White House. Relatively few keys relate to the elections itself. Only one addresses the challenger from the opposition party, i.e. Donald Trump. Lichtman's system has correctly predicted every election since 1984, including 2016.[23] Sometimes Lichtman will call an election years in advance, even before he even knows the identity of the challenger (like in 2012). For Lichtman, elections in the United States are presented as horseraces. They are more like earthquakes where a number of factors accumulate to produce a shift in tectonic plates (or not). The lesson from Lichtman is that politicians should focus more on governing well and improving people's lives rather than political campaigning.

We should beware of repeating the same mistake of overattributing to the media an ability to rescue democracy. This has happened frequently through

19 E.J. Kirby, "The city getting rich from fake news," BBC News, December 5, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38168281.

20 This statistic was reported by RT itself, but the study was conducted by the independent company Ipsos. RT, "RT watched by 70mn viewers weekly, half of them daily – Ipsos survey," March 10, 2016, www.rt.com/news/335123-rt-viewership-ipsos-study.

21 C. Paul and M. Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," RAND Corporation, 2016, http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html.

22 A. Rinke and A. Shalal, "Germany Alarmed about Potential Russian Interference in Election: Spy Chief," *Reuters*, November 16, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-russia-idUSKBN13B140.

23 Lichtman predicted Trump's victory on September 23, 2016. P.W. Stevenson, "Trump is headed for a win, says professor who has predicted 30 years of presidential outcomes correctly," *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/23/trump-is-headed-for-a-win-says-professor-whos-predicted-30-years-of-presidential-outcomes-correctly/?utm_term=.4a7a186517a2. For Lichtman's comments after the election, listen to National Public Radio: Hidden Brain, "What Happened? How Pollsters, Pundits, and Politics Got It Wrong," November 15, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2016/11/15/502074201/why-polls-predicted-a-hillary-clinton-win-and-were-so-wrong-about-the-election.

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history. A free press in the Weimar Republic did not stop the rise of the Nazi Party. The soul-searching about information happened on the other side of the Atlantic too. American commentator Walter Lippmann produced some of the most detailed studies about newspapers in the 1920s. Lippmann warned that newspapers could never possibly inform every citizen on every single topic or even most topics. This idea, wrote Lippmann, mistakenly portrays "the single reader as theoretically omnicompetent, and puts upon the press the burden of accomplishing whatever representative government, industrial organization, and diplomacy have failed to accomplish. Acting upon everyone for thirty minutes in twenty-four hours, the press is asked to create a mystical force called Public Opinion that will take up the slack in public institutions. The press has often mistakenly pretended that it could do just that."[24]

Lippmann advocated for a meritocratic elite to rule the country and direct the press. While the solution might not seem appropriate, Lippmann was right that the media can neither save nor destroy democracy singlehandedly.

> *"Politicians in power must focus on governing well; it is what matters most to voters."*

German politicians tend to view the media as more powerful than journalists themselves. In one survey, 38.5 percent of politicians agreed with the statement that the media, and not politicians, decide what topics are important in politics. Only 18.3 percent of journalists concurred.[25] The focus on communications carries the danger that politicians think everything can be manipulated. Instead, communications can build on effective policies or capitalize upon events to convey particular messages.

Recommendation: The media cannot paper over lived experience. Nor can it patch up crumbling institutions. Walter Lippmann taught us that lesson nearly a century ago; the Weimar Republic's free press taught us that lesson. We still have not learned it. Politicians in power must focus on governing well. In the end that is what matters most to voters.

Conclusion

The recommendations of this paper embody three simple principles:

First, remember that communications are only a tool. Communications can frame how people interpret lived experience. Communications can provide particular portrayals of lived experience that shape how citizens interpret their everyday lives and choose the government that might best provide for them. But communications are not a panacea.

Second, bring in new people with new perspectives on communications, irrespective of their age, expertise area, or background. They will reach new audiences and reinvigorate your existing base. They will generate new energy and enthusiasm. They may suggest new approaches that seem uncomfortably different initially. But in an age of rapid change, the most successful politicians will marry older techniques to reach more conventional voters with newer, more granular outreach.

Third, govern in a way that clearly aims to improve the lives of your citizens and addresses their major needs. Following these recommendations will work only when built upon a stable foundation of institutions and policies that citizens see, experience, and trust as beneficial in their everyday lives. Seize upon opportunities to communicate that. Many people in the German political establishment have said over the last six months: "Germany is doing really well; we just need to communicate the message better to our citizens." That statement is a giant neon warning sign. British and U.S. political establishments thought the same thing — to their peril.

24 W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p. 112f.

25 B. Pfetsch and E. Mayerhöffer, "Vordergründige Nähe. Zur Kommunikationskultur von Politik- und Medieneliten in Deutschland," *Medien- & Kommunikationswissenschaft* 59, no. 1 (2011): p. 40-59.

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